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ABSTRACT

World systems theory and feminist scholarship each have a great deal to offer the other, but the connections between the two have not often been recognized. The potential contributions from world systems theory include: (1) its understanding of history, (2) its understanding of what that history comprises, and (3) how it employs Marxist historical categories. Feminist scholarship must be anchored in a historical framework, but conventional historical benchmarks separating one period from another do not take note of women's experiences. These experiences have rarely been considered worthy of historical analysis. World systems theory provides a holistic approach to history, which considers the experiences of both men and women and focuses on processes rather than structures. But differences between world systems theory and feminist scholarship occur because of differing readings of Marx's discussion of social labor and the establishment of wage levels. Feminist theory could be enhanced if it would use Marxist theory as world systems theorists do. This would enable feminist scholarship to develop theories grounded in historical analysis rather than the current approach, which can offer only correctives to what would otherwise be an androcentric view of the world system. (IS)

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World-Systems Theory and Feminist Scholarship

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Compressing a discussion of the relationship between two major scholarly fields into a ten minute presentation is full of obvious hazards. Practitioners of both will quite properly want to take exception to the sweeping generalizations brevity will demand. If either of the fields was exclusively a matter of theory divorced from self-conscious political implications the hazards alone would dictate discretion. But both are avowedly and self-consciously political and for that reason alone their relationship bears scrutiny.

In what follows I will present what, in my view, are the key theoretical and methodological insights of world systems theory and how they bear on feminist theory. In turn, I will discuss, all too briefly, feminist contribution to world systems theory.[1]

There are three key aspects to world systems theory on which I will focus. First, its understanding of history, second, its understanding of what comprises that history and, third, how it utilizes Marxist historical categories.

Let me begin first with a brief discussion of the relevance of history to feminist scholarship. Much of what I say will be familiar territory but, like all familiar territory, traversing it will help in locating ourselves when reaching more foreign shores.

For two major reasons the best of feminist theory is firmly anchored in an historical framework. First, a practical reason. It continues to be obvious that conventional historical benchmarks delineating one period from another fail utterly to take note of women's experiences. Either the benchmark is irrelevant to women or, is an entirely different point of reference than it was for men.

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The second reason, connected to the first, is that scholars interested in historical capitalism appeared to relegate the so-called women question to the back-burners of historical analysis. Not only was this relegation poor theory, it made for bad politics.[2]

The problem of course was the need to identify the particular historically unique totality that could supply the appropriate frame to understand women's specific subordination and the specific results of that subordination. If none of the usual methods for dating social-historical phenomena provided the correct historical ground for capturing the essence of gender based inequities than, unless such inequities were consigned to the status of invariants, some new historical frame had to be devised. Several problems quickly emerged.[3]

Once feminists discarded the notion of relations of production per se as a method for locating the proper boundaries of specific forms of gender subordination they were faced with the necessity of constructing a substitute. Without going into too much detail which time simply does not allow let me just sketch out the problems with that project as it has worked out over the past twenty years or so.

Once relations of production were ruled out of court as providing the appropriate historical benchmark, feminists turned to other categories that appeared to exist independent of such relations. Not surprisingly these historical accounts of gender were unable to cope with contemporaneous diversity not only in particular socio-economic structures but the relationship between those structures and the amazing diversity in gender structures. This dilemma led to the reliance on explanatory devices that accorded an almost universal status to gender subordination. "Why is it always women" is not only a bad historical question but has implied in it an

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utterly non-historical answer. The result was predictable. A project that began with the search for an alternative historical account has come up with no historical account at all, leaving in tact the account that was initially and quite properly criticized.

Much of the appearance of universality stems from one analytical device employed by many feminists and that is to rip out of any particular historical moment the set of behaviors or relationships that were supposed to constitute gender subordination and then use these bits of historical material to weave an explanation using similar pieces from other historical periods. The problem with this approach - and there are in fact several - is that by emphasizing pieces it sacrifices the totality within which quite ordinary people live out their lives. And it is here that I think world systems theory makes its most salient contribution to feminist thought.

In contrast to emphasizing the sovereignty of any of its parts, world systems theory draws our attention to the totality of the social world as it is historically constructed. It is world systems theory that has emphasized that no set of relations is explicable on its own terms; that a necessary condition for any relationship is its incorporation into a historically unique totality. While that totality exists as a unity, from the perspective of world systems theory, its very nature is that it is composed of a confluence of highly contradictory processes.[4]

Obviously world systems theory concentrates on units far different than those that capture the attention of feminist scholars. Nevertheless, the methodological point is still well worth considering. The very nature of the world-system is that it is composed of widely divergent forms of social domination. What provides the "wholeness" to that world is the particular relationship of each to the processes inherent to commodity production on a

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world scale. Though each of these forms of domination can be studied in its own right, the task would utterly fail if its relationship to the totality of which it is a part was not specified.

Let me use slavery as an example. In North Carolina in 1850 slavery was utterly different than in Rome in the third century. Similarity is provided only by the most abstract characteristics. What made these two forms of domination different was their relationship to an altogether different totality. When either system of slavery came to a halt in either period its demise not only changed the lives of those most subject to it but created conditions for a whole panoply of social changes. These changes can not even be comprehended as long as the most abstract characteristics of slavery are the object of analysis.[5]

The analogy to domination based on gender should be all too clear. If two sets of social relationships are subject to entirely different historical processes and make possible entirely different historical dynamics than their resemblance to each other (no matter how close) is considerably less interesting than their differences. If, as feminists, our historical analysis does not allow us to see at least implicitly beyond present arrangement - no matter if those arrangements are of the fourth century or the 20th - than the analysis itself has failed as an historical account.[6]

This then leads me to the second methodological insight of world systems theory and that is its insistence that history is composed not of structures of relationships but of processes. In order to show the relevance to feminist theory let me return to the example I gave earlier.

Many feminist scholars, as I said, proceed by taking a piece of gender domination - mothering, job segregation by sex and so on - and identify attributes to those structures of domination with others that can be found in

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other historical settings. This approach centers our attention on attributes of relationships rather than on the historical processes that constantly form and reform them. Since these structures of gender domination are the concrete outcomes of the relational processes that compose the historical world (and note here that I am using the word compose in its most active sense) by centering on these pieces of structures as explanatory categories, feminists assume precisely that which requires understanding. Attributed to these pieces is a theoretical autonomy that conceptually can only belong to the relational processes which are responsible for them.

In its attempt to account for specific relational structures, world systems theory centers its attention on relational processes. Though not always successful - the project has its critics - the insights provided by world systems theory are important. By attending to processes rather than structures, feminists can account for the trajectory of those structures of gender domination across time - for both their birth and eventual demise.

There is no question that the contemporary subordination of women has its own contradictions which provide the fuel - the tensions - for profound change. As feminists have quite rightly pointed out, the real nature of those contradictions is to be found in the subtle and highly complex set of relationships between the public sphere of production and that of private reproduction. But this is not to say that the private sphere of reproduction has its own unique history; its own laws, the operation of which, in the presence of modern forms of labor control, produces these contradictions.[7]

Quite to the contrary. The modern world-economy - and this is one of the key insights of world systems theory - is the ensemble of a multiplicity of labor forms no one of which is explicable on its own terms; no one of which occupies some privileged status whether in real historical time or in theory;

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no one of which takes precedence over the other. Because of this insight, world systems theory must insist on a historical totality composed of and by relational processes. Feminists and world systems theorists found an arena of agreement in noting that labor forms controlled exclusively by a formal market was only one of a whole variety of ways of organizing labor and its product. Nor were they alone.

If one single theme can be said to dominate in social theory since the end of the 1940's it is that the formal economy has its limits. Whether the object of inquiry was the family or Third World economies, formal organizations or the state, the observation that the contemporary wage relationship had limits as an explanatory device led most theorists to discard relations of production altogether as a fundamental method for understanding the world. The sole exceptions were those working within what became world systems theory. And it was here that feminists part company with world systems theory and adopt the view of more conventional theory.

The difference between the two - between feminist theory and world systems analysis - is not necessarily political - though it has serious political implications - but is based on a particular reading of Marx. Not unlike more conventional theory, feminist theory reads Marx's descriptions of social labor not as a set of assumptions made exclusively for heuristic purposes but as an attempt to account for the totality of contemporary production and productive relations. Marx's project, especially in Capital, could not have been more different.[8] Since Marx was concerned to show the mechanisms of what he called the "self-expansion of capital" he made a set of simplifying assumptions, all of which were intended not as a real description of the social world at the time nor even as a prediction of what the world would become but as a device employed to lay bare the bones of capitalist

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accumulation proper. Among these assumptions are two of enormous importance to feminists - the degree to which the world has been "capitalized" and the degree to which wages are based on reproductive costs.

For Marx's purposes he could assume that the entire world of production was composed of relations between waged workers and capital. However, this assumption was no more a description of the real world than is the assumption of a perfect vacuum in the attempt to account for the laws of motion. Nevertheless, because feminist scholars in large measure took this to be Marx's description of the world, they proceeded to eschew Marx altogether. World systems theory took an entirely different course, one which has proven, in my view, considerably more fruitful.

The question raised by world systems theory is what happens if this assumption is relaxed. What is then necessary in order to make an accurate historical analysis? Within the world systems paradigm what is depicted theoretically is the set of historical processes whereby noncapitalized means of production are converted into capital. The question of how noncapitalized forms of labor can be integrated with each other and with capitalist production processes proper then becomes not an ad hoc question but one systematically linked to an understanding of the operations of world economy itself.

The second area within which Marx was willing to make simplifying assumptions and to which world systems theorists properly call our attention is that relevant to the establishment of wage levels. For his theoretical purposes, Marx could leave out of account real wage levels and how they are actually established. But central to world systems theory is precisely the wide variety of wage levels to be found in the world system.

There are two possible relational sources for unequal wage levels in the

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world-economy. One stems from differences that predate the incursions of capital and the other created by that incursion. In either case a coherent historical interpretation would require specifying how those differentials are both created and maintained; what are the historical forms and arrangements for reproducing inequalities and how is the vast panoply of these arrangements knitted together to form a singular world economy.

Similarly, Marx left wide open the question of the determination of what is an appropriate level of replenishment. This of course raises the issue of the relative value assigned to different segments of the labor force - a process of social consciousness and ideology.[9]

Let me conclude by saying that feminist scholarship has itself made a massive contribution to world systems theory by calling attention to the role of gender in perpetuating inequalities; in making available a non-traditional strata of workers to the wage labor force and in reducing wage pressures. In addition it has reinforced the view that consciousness itself must be part of the set of processes responsible for forming and reforming the world-economy. Nevertheless, for all of its contributions, without a secure footing in an historical understanding of the world economy itself, feminism can only offer correctives to what would otherwise be an androcentric view of the world-system.

By asserting an empirical and conceptual autonomy to systems of gender subordination, feminist theory has willy-nilly surrendered the field of historical analysis. This is not at all to say that feminists have been silent on questions relevant to the formation and reformation of the capitalist world-system. Quite to the contrary. Feminists have been outspoken on issues of racism as well as sexism; on issues of wage equities and on the abiding inequities between core states and the periphery; on issues

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of domination and subordination between nations and people. But that voice has had to be an auxiliary one since feminist theory has in very large measure deserted the field upon which conceptualizations of these matters take place.

My own view is that world-systems method and theory offers the most lucrative terrain for rethinking feminist theory. That is not at all to say that feminists should become world-systems theorists. But only that that theory is the one that is first of all most compatible with feminist insights and secondly offers suggestions on how to proceed on grounds that have proven most troublesome to the construction of sound feminist theory.

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Footnotes

[1]Because of the brevity of the presentation, I must lump together practitioners of feminist theory on one hand and world systems theory on the other into two camps, ignoring the differences that are considerable. However, I believe what I say about each is more or less true in the sense that the description is accurate as far as it goes.

[2]M. Jane Slaughter, "Feminism and Socialism: Theoretical Debates in Historical Capitalism," Marxist Perspectives, II, 3, pp. 32-49.

[3]I discuss these problems at some length in "Feminism and Analytic Method: The Case of Unwaged Domestic Labor," Current Perspectives in Social Theory, 4 (1983), pp. 205-223.

[4]Clearly the stress on totalities is not original with world systems theory. However, it is the contemporary field of inquiry that has put the insistence on totalities to its most important use.

[5]Dale Tomich, "Original Accumulation, Colonial Slavery and the Transition from Feudalism to Capitalism," mimeo, 1981.

[6]Terence K. Hopkins, Immanuel Wallerstein and Associates, eds., World-Systems Analysis: Theory and Methodology. Beverly Hills: Sage Publications, 1982, pp. 188 ff.

[7]This is the view put forth by Zillah Eisenstein, The Radical Future of Liberal Feminism. New York: Longman, 1981.

[8]For a longer version of this account, see Terence K. Hopkins, "The Study of the Capitalist World-economy: Some Introductory Considerations," in Terence K. Hopkins, Immanuel Wallerstein and Associates, op. cit., pp. 9-38.

[9]Terence K. Hopkins, op. cit., p. 22.

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